



Aldeburgh Library Foundation

Shaping the future for Aldeburgh Library

The Aldeburgh Library Foundation (ALF) was formed in August 2012 as a Limited Company, by the Steering Group that had been set up at the beginning of 2011 in response to the threat of widespread library closures in Suffolk and nationally. ALF was registered as a Charity in January 2013.

The original aim was to expand the use of the Library with tailored programmes for adult learning, attracting young people as library users, providing better access to IT, and accessible public facilities.

Working through partnerships

In offering a way forward for Aldeburgh Library, however, that proposal also set out some general principles about the need for public sector authorities to work with local communities in identifying local priorities and achieving shared objectives, harnessing the capacity of the voluntary sector. Seen by SCC as a model for a new partnership approach county-wide, Aldeburgh became a pathfinder for testing new ways of developing libraries into community hubs through local participation in management.

At the beginning of 2012, the Aldeburgh Steering Group then responded to that wider challenge by co-operating with SCC in helping to set up the new *Suffolk's Libraries Industrial & Provident Society Ltd* (Suffolk Libraries), a charitable co-operative membership organisation for all libraries, which has since been commissioned by SCC to run all library services from August 2012.

Since 2012 we have ensured wide public knowledge of progress with these developing plans through a range of methods including regular news updates in local publications, public meetings and briefings to other local organisations. The remarkable success of both the adult learning programmes and membership of the Friends of Aldeburgh Library have helped to raise the Library's profile and disseminate information throughout the community.

The Foundation's purpose and principles

The overall policy and the specific life-long learning strategy now being pursued by the Foundation are those we set out in the published 2011 Proposal. We have not sought to take on the employment of the staff or the lease of the building (both of which now sit with *Suffolk Libraries*), since we believe it is more important to focus on a programme of adult learning courses, on engaging young people, and on building links between existing library services and the potential offered by Aldeburgh's rich cultural heritage and educational resources. It is also a priority to improve the Library's facilities to create a more attractive public environment for all users and age groups.

The Foundation's Board sees its role as working in partnership with the professional library staff, supporting and enhancing their work by bringing a wider range of professional skills and local knowledge to the tasks. The Library Manager attends Board meetings *ex officio* as a non-voting

member. The Board is seen not as a committee but a working group, a small team of people with a range of practical expertise who are willing to put in a great deal of hard work voluntarily.

Our Purpose

The purpose of the Company is to encourage, promote and support the development of a thriving knowledge hub at the heart of the Aldeburgh community for the benefit of the whole community, in which reading, learning and sharing knowledge can help to shape the community's future well-being, through the following objects.

- To promote and enable reading, learning and the sharing of knowledge through free access to book borrowing, electronic and other information services.
- To make other educational, cultural and entertainment materials available for hire.
- To encourage access to informal adult learning, skills training and employment opportunities.
- To facilitate activities to improve well-being.
- To provide a welcoming, accessible environment where social inclusion and community development can safely prosper in response to changing demographic, socio-economic and educational needs of the people in the area of benefit.
- To build partnerships of shared interest between public, private and voluntary sectors at the heart of the Aldeburgh community.

Responding to local priorities

For all of the changes and developments so far, we conducted wide-scale public consultations, using questionnaires distributed through the local journals and door-to-door, as well as through many locally-familiar contact points. Public responses on plans for adult learning courses dictated the content of the pilot programme, and continuous evaluation using participants' feed-back has helped to shape the detail of the greatly expanded programme.

Reflecting majority public views, early management interventions included changing the opening hours of the basic library service from January 2013 so as to provide more coherent 7-day library opening (within the same staff-cost limits) and to maximize the use of the building for courses at other times by using volunteers. The new hours reflect predominant patterns of public demand, so the usual Library services are now available every morning and later one weekday afternoon, with longer periods on both Saturdays and Sundays. Learning courses are now run on five afternoons; and by moving the self-service machine for registering library book returns and renewals to the foyer, it is now also accessible to the public outside Library hours, when courses are happening inside.

Developing the learning programme

With no previous experience of using the Library for wider cultural activities, or of offering 'life-long learning' courses in Aldeburgh, during autumn 2012 we ran an exploratory pilot programme of ten adult learning courses selected to reflect people's priorities expressed in the earlier consultation; tutors

were selected for their ability to engage with new and diverse students of all ages, and their willingness to adapt to limitations of a library environment.

Library opening hours could not be changed at that early stage, so initially these pilot courses had to be shoe-horned into two days each week between 10 am and 8 pm. Nevertheless, they proved hugely successful; not just in terms of new adult learning opportunities seized by residents with very active minds (if in some cases more limited mobility with advancing years in retirement), but also in providing a conducive environment in which to share knowledge with others.

The overwhelmingly positive and enthusiastic response of our students and their tutors in the autumn of 2012 produced a new demand for more adult learning opportunities, both from first-time students now hooked on the enjoyment of acquiring new knowledge and skills in a congenial and welcoming atmosphere, and from an expanding field of potential 'life-long learners'. In response, a second term ran through to May 2013, so that during 2012-13 we provided 26 courses for 170 students, some attending two or three different courses. The programme has flourished and in 2015 there were nearly 400 course registrations and 36 courses.

Already, the Library is being seen as much more than just a place to borrow books. We were the first local library to introduce wi-fi, both for computer-based courses and for individual users wanting a place to access the internet. The surprisingly large demand for computer courses for beginners and later for improvers meant that we had to install and provide our own broadband connection. Suffolk Libraries now provide free WiFi in all libraries.

Our efforts on behalf of the community were recognized in 2014 at the Suffolk Adult Learner Awards ceremony where we won the award for our extensive programme of adult learning courses for local people. We also had the runner up in the Over 65 Learner of the Year award in the person of Liz Grugeon. Suffolk Libraries nominated us for the award organised by LEAP (unique to Suffolk it provides advice and guidance to adults seeking education or training opportunities and careers advice) and the Suffolk Partnership for Informal Adult Learning (SPIAL) to celebrate the hard work and outstanding achievements by adult learners.

The Manager and staff have welcomed and supported these developments. They have also introduced new Library-based activities highlighting the potential of the book stock, particularly for young people, drawing in parents in support. Building stronger links between the Aldeburgh Primary School and the Library's potential educational resources remains a priority. Through collaboration with staff of the Britten-Pears Foundation at Red House (also one of our course tutors), the library displayed a specially-designed exhibition to celebrate Benjamin Britten's centenary in 2013.

This policy of developing the Library's potential as a knowledge hub for the Town is already having a visible impact on user-numbers across the board, with increased through-flow of customers and new Library membership leading to more book borrowing. Currently with nearly 1,000 regular users in the Aldeburgh area, and strong links with school children and their parents, the future Library will serve the whole community across the spectrum from very young to elderly, working adults and retired.

The Friends of Aldeburgh Library

Ensuring wide public participation in shaping the future of the Library was a key commitment of the origins of ALF. The Friends of Aldeburgh Library (FOAL) has been established as an integral 'supporters arm' of the Foundation, initially built around the core of adult course subscribers and others, in early 2016 we reached 300 members. Members of FOAL are also now Associate Members of the Foundation, participating in its governance by nominating a member of the Board, as do the Town Council and the Aldeburgh Society. In 2015, following a successful pilot, the benefits to FOAL

members were extended to include an Aldeburgh Loyalty Card, a scheme designed developed by a Board member and launched by the Mayor giving members a 10% discount in local businesses.

Improving the facilities

A rota from a regular team of volunteers, together with some paid help from our Steward, services the catering needs for all adult learning sessions, enhancing their social atmosphere, providing opportunities for informal discussion, and also raising valuable additional resources. The Foundation has raised funds and carried out improvements to the building needed by enhanced public use. These have included building toilet facilities accessible to the disabled, basic catering facilities, and essential equipment to support adult learning courses, including furniture that can be easily adapted to different sessions, and window blinds. We have also improved the visual impact of the library spaces internally, engaging local children and their parents in helping to select photographic images from local sources to identify and delineate different functional areas of the Library.

An iconic building in a key location

Aldeburgh Library, designed by a former County Architect, is a fine example of the innovative use of shaped timber and glass construction influenced by Scandinavian design in the 1960s, and the star-shaped building is a local landmark overlooking Triangle Wood on the approach to the High Street and sea front. With the progressive housing developments of past decades, the residential centre of Aldeburgh has shifted, so that the Library is now in a central position for its population.

The composer Benjamin Britten made it possible to buy the Triangle Wood site and build the Library with a generous donation, reflecting his deep-rooted and lifelong commitment to Aldeburgh and the Suffolk coast. With the emphasis he placed in his own creative work on literary sources, and the remarkable private library he and Peter Pears created at Red House, he believed it was important for Aldeburgh and its community to have a modern Library. Opened on his behalf by his colleague and friend Imogen Holst in 1968 (he was already too ill to do so at the time), it has served generations as a much-used lending library.

Our role in National Policy

During 2014 William Sieghart undertook a national review of public library services on behalf of the government, he has close connections to our town, and began his libraries tour at Aldeburgh “because the Library was the talk of the Town”. The whole of Suffolk Libraries example impressed him with its attitude of turning adversity into positive solutions, and the evident enthusiasm of local communities throughout the County. It is great credit to Suffolk Libraries that the whole spectrum of 44 libraries was already engaged as members within the first year of its independent existence. We feature in the Sieghart Report as an example of what local communities can achieve.

In 2015 we were asked to be involved in the ‘Universal Learning Offer’ for libraries throughout England an initiative led by the Society of Chief Librarians which focuses upon the role libraries can and do play in promoting, supporting and offering learning opportunities. We were represented at the national launch and feature in the video produced to exemplify community-led learning in libraries.

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